Farm labor, general

THE CONDITION OF FARM WORKERS IN 1957

REPORT TO THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS OF NATIONAL SHARECROPPERS FUND, INC.
By Fay Bennett, Executive Secretary

The year 1957 ended with great suffering for thousands of migrant and sharecropper families in different parts of the United States. Crop freezes in Florida brought reports like this:

> "...Whole families are forced to live in the open...Many are making homes in cardboard and any other kind of makeshift shacks in the woods..."
> --Miami Daily News (February 22, 1958)

Floods followed by a cold wave brought this to Tennessee:

> "...Literally thousands of farm families in the 'Mississippi bottoms' area actually are hungry and facing starvation unless help comes quickly..." --Atlanta Journal-Constitution (January 12, 1958)

No weather problems but just the ordinary situation for migrants in California is told here:

> "...Longest slum in the world...village conditions in Pakistan no worse than some of the California camps...migratory families living under conditions similar to refugees in Seoul (Korea)..."
> --San Jose Mercury (January 23, 1958)

A freeze or flood serves to underscore the fact that most farm worker families are so low on the economic scale that few have reserves to meet emergencies.

THE AMERICAN FARM

The estimated farm population in April, 1957, was 20,396,000 persons, a drop of over 1 million in a year and a decrease of 4,662,000 since 1950. A clearer picture can be obtained from a division of farms according to the dollar value of their output.

Of the almost 5 million farms in the U. S. according to the 1954 census, 3% -- 134,000 -- produce 31.3% of the output and utilize 22.4% of the farm acreage. It is estimated that these 134,000 farms employ more than 20% of the approximately 2 million domestic farm workers and the great bulk of the 466,000 imported contract workers. These are the farms whose output adds up to the surpluses the federal subsidy program is supposed to curtail. The surplus is not increased significantly by the 1 million small farmers -- more than 1/3 of all commercial farms -- whose gross income is less than $2,500. Yet government programs, working against themselves, continue to favor the 134,000.

FAMILY FARMS FACE CRISIS

As thoughtful people become increasingly concerned with the equation of bigness in industrial life with the growth toward conformity, attention may well be focused upon the American family farmer who through the decades has represented freedom. Owning his own land and self-employed, the farmer has been free to speak as he believed. But, in order to make use of mechanization and improved farming methods, a successful farm must have sufficient acreage and capital. The availability of credit at reasonable interest rates and other government policies play a vital role in determining whether the family farmer will stay in business or be displaced by the giant corporation farms. Here is how the pattern of government policies emerges:

> Total federal farm expenditures for all farm programs including subsidy payments were about 5 billion dollars last year. About 2 billion dollars were spent directly for stabilizing farm prices. Over 500 million dollars went in direct cash payments under the soil bank program, paid largely to corporation farms. Over 1/4 million dollars ($278,187.38) was paid to just one farmer under the latter program.
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> These sums contrast sharply with the $342.5 million spent by the Farmers Home Administration in its loan program for the year on behalf of small

farmers who have no other source of credit. Making loans to approximately 118,000 farmers, the average loan to each was less than $2,000.

Other government policies favoring the big farm include the farm labor import program which brings nearly 1/2 million under-paid foreign workers into the country and no minimum wage and maximum hour legislation for American farm workers. The so-called efficiency of the corporate farms would seem to stem in large part from the subsidies they receive directly in government cash payments and indirectly in the exploitation of farm labor. This program of subsidizing bigness throws more and more small farmers off their land into the city slums or into the migrant stream. Is this good for America?

THE MIGRANT WORKER

Here is a sample of his life as one of the 1/2 million to 1 million* migrant farm workers in this country:

Men, women and children loaded onto trucks in early evening. First stop made at 11 P.M. for a meal. Told by diner's proprietor to move on. Next stop at 1 A.M. for gas. Migrants not allowed to use toilets. An hour later stop made in a woods for "bathroom" purposes. Continued riding all night. Stopped at 6 A.M. for purchase of cold cuts, bread and soda pop at country store. At noon stopped for drinking water at a spring. State troopers followed trucks rest of day and no stops permitted. At 8 P.M. stop made at a country store to purchase more cold cuts, bread and soda pop. State troopers prevented migrants from leaving truck. Stopped at 3 A.M. for 1-1/2 hours for sleep. At 11 A.M. of second day, migrants arrived at the camp where they hoped to work. (Adapted from a Florida State Board of Health report.)

What does the migrant find at "camp?" Sun-up to sun-down picking if the weather is good. Days of being cooped up in crowded shacks if rain sets in.

In most cases, housing for migrants is wretched. Even in Northern states it sometimes consists of abandoned barns, chicken coops and delapidated shacks. Men, women and children are often herded into one room. Medical attention for migrants is sporadic at best. Cases of infant diarrhea as well as disabling illness of adults have many times gone untreated. Schooling in the past usually has consisted of a few years in elementary school, and this in inferior segregated southern schools which until recently only held "short sessions" so children could work in the fields. Education now must be of prime concern if we are to seek a better life for the children than their parents have.

MIGRANT AID

On the national level the President's Committee on Migratory Labor acts for government. With the barest budget ($56,000 annually), it works with states and federal departments concerned with migrants. It has produced some good recommendations in the fields of housing and transportation and is now working on recommendations for insurance coverage and registration of crewleaders.

The Interstate Commerce Commission adopted regulations on June 17th governing the transportation of migrants for interstate travel. The regulations became effective August 1st, with the provision that the requirements as to seats and seating space in trucks would be observed on and after November 1st. During this interval, several serious accidents occurred involving migrants riding in trucks, including the overturning and burning of a flat-bed truck in North Carolina in June killing 17 men, women and children and injuring 26 more. Even now the new federal law covers only those migrants traveling more than 75 miles, and crossing state boundaries. Only a few states have laws covering migrant transportation within a state.

A non-governmental agency which performs admirable service in this field on a low budget is NATIONAL COUNCIL ON AGRICULTURAL LIFE AND LABOR, a clearing house with which the Fund and 35 other citizen organizations work for improve-

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*No one knows the exact number of migrant workers. The government takes census figures of migrant birds but not of migrant workers.

ments for farm workers and the small family farmer. NSF contributes to its support. Its excellent informative Bulletin is sent regularly to affiliated groups and individual subscribers.

ORGANIZED LABOR AND NATION'S FARM WORKERS

With a special grant from the Industrial Union Department of AFL-CIO, the National Agricultural Workers Union increased its efforts to organize workers on the large western farms. Under the dynamic leadership of Ernesto Galarza, it uncovered many areas where Mexican nationals were used in defiance of the law while domestic workers were unemployed. It documented repeated charges of hunger and homelessness, citing whole families sleeping on river banks and under bridges. Galarza's evidence was presented to the California governor with the result that more jobs were opened up to the local workers and the Farm Placement Service curtailed use of Mexican nationals in certain areas.

Another accomplishment of the union's persistence was opening of the records of the State Department of Employment to public inspection to determine how many foreign nationals were being employed in a given area. This is an important step in breaking down the screen of secrecy behind which the foreign labor program has operated in some states.

The National Agricultural Workers Union (formerly Southern Tenant Farmers Union) continued its work with the group of small farmers in Louisiana who had formed a cooperative association to market their strawberry and vegetable crops. With its devoted president, H. L. Mitchell (the son of an Arkansas tenant farmer) often on the local scene, nearly 1,000 new members joined the union in the state. Union contracts were negotiated with employers of 600 sugar cane workers in Louisiana providing wage increases of 12¢ to 17¢ an hour and other benefits. Union efforts are slowly improving wages and conditions which even now are barely adequate for subsistence although the large growers in Louisiana receive some of the largest subsidy benefits handed out by government.

At a luncheon honoring Dr. Frank P. Graham, held in Atlantic City during the AFL-CIO convention, many labor leaders praised Dr. Graham for his long service to the nation's underprivileged, lauded his leadership of National Sharecroppers Fund, and called for a real effort on the part of organized labor to raise the living standards of farm workers. A. Philip Randolph used the occasion to announce that AFL-CIO President George Meany had authorized a survey preliminary to the development of an organizing campaign among the nation's 2 million unorganized farm workers. Later, it was reported that this survey is to be made through the facilities of the AFL-CIO Industrial Union Department of which Walter P. Reuther is president. At this writing, the AFL-CIO survey has not yet been launched but NSF is hopeful that 1958 will see the opening of a full-scale farm workers organization campaign backed by the labor movement.

CONTRACT LABOR

The program for importing nationals from other countries under temporary contract to work on American farms has accelerated. The Immigration Service provides the following figures for the fiscal year ending June 30 1957:

Total imported contract laborers	466,713
Contract laborers imported from Mexico*	450,422
" " " " Canada	7,015
" " " " British West Indies	8,244
" " " " Japan	1,000
" " " " French West Indies	32

In addition to these, the Department of Labor lists 3,912 temporary farm workers coming to this country during 1957 from the Bahamas. From Puerto Rico, 13,214 seasonal farm workers came under contract and an estimated 10,000 additional Puerto Rican migrants came on their own. (Since Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens, they are free to move back and forth between the islands and the mainland.)

*The Immigration Service reports an additional 44,451 Mexican workers illegally in the U.S. who were apprehended during the year.

Peak number of all Americans engaged in agriculture in 1957 were 10,077,000 according to the Department of Agriculture. About 2 million are farm laborers. Despite the fact that chronic unemployment* exists for American farm workers a good part of the year, caused by intense specialization and factory farming, 25% more than the available supply of American farm labor is imported.

MOUNTING CONCERN EXPRESSED FOR CONTRACT LABOR ABUSES

Following the publication of "Strangers in Our Fields," based on an extensive field study by Ernesto Galarza documenting the shocking disregard of the rights of the Mexican nationals, the Department of Labor issued new housing regulations. When enforcement officers attempted to put the regulations into practice, the growers fought against this attempt to enforce the law. A result of the growers' campaign has been a smaller appropriation in the coming year's federal budget for enforcing compliance of the Mexican workers' agreement.

The widespread violations of the Mexican nationals' contracts, and the exploitation of American farm workers who work without benefit of contract or protective legislation, is in strong contrast to the benefits accorded Puerto Rican and British West Indian seasonal workers in this country. To the credit of their representatives, offices are maintained in this country and careful supervision is given to the work contracts which include guaranteed hours of work, minimum or prevailing wages (whichever are higher), and group insurance providing hospitalization, surgical benefits, out-patient benefits, doctors' calls, weekly income for workers unable to work because of accident or illness, and death benefits. Decent housing, transportation, and meals are also carefully stipulated and enforced. No such contract benefits accrue to American migrants.

DEEP SOUTH DEVELOPMENTS

Sharecropping, segregation, one-party politics -- this is the triumvirate which has controlled life in the South since the Civil War, keeping it nearly static. All three are slowly but surely on the way out. Industrialization is quickening the pace of the South's revolution. It is bringing opportunity to many who are no longer needed on the land. But the uneducated Negro sharecropper or tenant farmer is not yet welcome to the developing industry of the South. Where does he go? If he has a relative in a northern city, he may go there (if he can afford the fare) and join the already over-packed city slums. Or he joins the steadily increasing migrant stream.

NSF has long maintained that civil and political rights for the southern Negro go hand in hand with his struggle for economic advancement. In the states where Negroes (and poor whites) have the least education and the lowest standards of living, there is also the lowest percentage of voters. The figures on voter-turnout in the 1956 presidential election show Georgia, Alabama, South Carolina and Mississippi at the very bottom of the 48 states with the following percentages of voters per 100 persons of voting age, in respective order: 30.4%, 28.5%, 24.6%, 22.1%. This compares with a median percentage for all the states of 67%.

By far the largest number of farm families with cash incomes of <u>less</u> than $1,000 are in the South. These southern states need government help most in services to farmers such as adequate credit and employment, vocational, health and educational programs. A small step in this direction is being taken by the Department of Agriculture's Rural Development Program which has now completed its second year. Working in selected pilot counties, the program attempts to enlist the aid of various government agencies as well as business men, church groups, farm people and others. Admittedly a "bootstrap" operation, the program suffers from inadequate staff and financing and does not seem to rank high in the administration's plans for concentrated effort.

Economic pressures against the independent Negro farmer, sharecropper and tenant farmer continued to come to the attention of NSF. The Fund continued its interest in finding help for some and granted several loans from its own funds. However, NSF believes that the attainment of economic, social, and political

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*5½ million unemployed in industry at present writing makes the problem of importing temporary cheap labor increasingly serious.

rights is a primary responsibility of federal and local government. NSF attempts to bring the facts and the need for responsible action before the people and government through its literature, reports, conferences, and public statements.

LEGISLATION

No new legislation affecting farm workers was passed by the U.S. Congress during the year, although hearings were held on a bill to extend coverage of the minimum wage law to additional groups of workers including some agricultural workers. NSF supported this legislation. Testifying on behalf of the Fund before the House Subcommittee on Labor Standards, Dr. Lewis W. Jones of Tuskegee Institute presented facts and figures showing graphically the extent of sub-standard wages and living conditions of farm workers in the southern states. Pointing out that these farm workers are also seasonal, Dr. Jones said, "Under-employment of hired workers makes the small wages paid them while employed more distressing." A similar bill is expected to be introduced in 1958.

NSF SPONSORS NATIONAL CONFERENCE

In order to focus nation-wide attention on these serious problems, an all-day conference was held in New York on November 13th, bringing together representatives from government, labor, farm and civic groups. Sponsored by NSF and many distinguished Americans, the conference met in three round tables, heard experts, and adopted a series of recommendations for improving conditions for migrant and other farm labor, for investigating the government program for importing foreign farm labor and for help to the low-income family farmer.

A major conference recommendation called upon Secretary of Labor Mitchell to appoint a tripartite committee, consisting of representatives of the public, employers and labor to investigate the contract labor program, its abuses, its effect upon American farm workers' opportunities and standards, and its influence upon the competitive position of family farms.

Another major conference recommendation was that organized labor take responsibility for organizing farm workers into effective unions, recognizing that the present National Agricultural Workers Union lacks adequate funds and personnel to do this job. (With farm workers themselves having incomes too low to support an organizing campaign, the Agricultural Workers Union has received some financial support from other sympathetic unions and from NSF.)

Conference recommendations also called for federal and state legislation guaranteeing for farm workers minimum wages, unemployment insurance, workmen's compensation, sickness and disability benefits, old age assistance, licensing and bonding of crew leaders, uniform standards for housing for migrant workers, enforcement of sanitary and health provisions for migrant camps, regulation of transportation for migrants and educational programs for their children. The conference called for a reversal of the present trend forcing thousands of farm families out of agriculture. Specific programs to help low income farmers were urged.

The conference approved a resolution urging the Board of Directors of NSF to "take the initiative in forming a nation-wide advisory board of distinguished Americans to bring the recommendations and concerns of this conference before the organized labor movement and the Congress of the United States." (Printed conference proceedings and literature list are available from NSF office.)

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In existence for 20 years, the Fund finds growing opportunities for bringing these issues before the American public whose awareness and interest must be aroused before corrective measures will come.